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[Home](#) > The Truth About the Liberal Order

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The Truth About the Liberal Order
Why It Didn't Make the Modern World
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Few ideas have gained more widespread currency within the U.S. foreign policy community in the last few years than that of the liberal international order. In my recent essay, "[The Myth of the Liberal Order](#) ^[1]," I identified three core claims made by advocates of the order about its significance: "First, that the liberal order has been the principal cause of the so-called long peace among great powers for the past seven decades. Second, that constructing this order has been the main driver of U.S. engagement in the world over that period. And third, that U.S. President Donald Trump is the primary threat to the liberal order—and thus to world peace." Each claim contains grains of truth, I argued, but each is more wrong than right.

Since the article was published, several scholars have pushed back. Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper [argue](#) ^[2] that the "liberal order is more than a myth." And Michael J. Mazarr [suggests](#) ^[3] that I have misread the order's history and purpose. Their responses are serious and thoughtful, but they do little to undermine my argument.

THE LONG PEACE

The most inconvenient fact for those who argue that the liberal order has played a major role in the long peace since World War II is that more than 40 of the 70 peaceful years took place during the Cold War. The absence of major power conflict, as I wrote, "was not the result of a liberal order but the byproduct of the dangerous balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States." On this point, I quoted the historian John Lewis Gaddis in his definitive article on the long peace: "Without anyone's having designed it," he wrote, "and without any attempt whatever to consider the requirements of justice, the nations of the postwar era lucked into a system of international relations that, because it has been based upon realities of power, has served the cause of order—if not justice—better than one might have expected."

Neither Lissner and Rapp-Hooper nor Mazarr attempts to defend the proposition that the liberal order led to the long peace. Mazarr comes closest to engaging with this argument directly when he says that he is "not aware of anyone who holds such an extreme view of the order's importance." But in my article, I quote the international relations scholar Joseph Nye making precisely this claim when he refers to "the demonstrable success of the order in helping secure and stabilize the world over the past seven decades." Indeed, in recent years, many authors have asserted versions of this point in *Foreign Affairs*. Consider G. John Ikenberry's [suggestion](#) ^[4], made last year, that "the defenders of the order should start by reclaiming the master narrative of the last 70 years. . . . The world has been spared great-power war."

Last month, 43 distinguished international relations scholars bought space in *The New York Times* to publish a manifesto titled "Why We Should Preserve International Institutions and Order." The strongest claim they make there is that "the international order formed after World War II . . . contribut[ed] to . . . the longest period in modern history without war between major powers." "Contributed to" raises the question: By how much?

Determining the relative importance of the factors that prevented great power wars over the last 70 years is not just an academic exercise. If the long peace was no accident, something on which Lissner, Rapp-Hooper, Mazarr, and I all agree, then figuring out which factors mattered most is crucial to keeping it going. Mazarr claims that the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other institutions were "a complement to other factors underwriting peace and prosperity." For each, we should ask: Was it necessary? Had it not existed, that is, would the great powers have gone to war? Then we should ask: Was it sufficient to ensure peace?

The only element of the postwar order that was, by itself, sufficient to maintain the peace was the combination of U.S. military and economic power with the determination of American leaders to use that power to contain and ultimately defeat the Soviet Union. I agree that in establishing the UN, creating the Bretton Woods institutions, reconstructing Germany and Japan as democracies, and promoting human rights, the United States was doing good and that undermining these aspects of global order harms U.S. national interests. But neither response makes a convincing case that any one of these was either sufficient or necessary for the long peace. It's also worth noting that many illiberal alliances and alignments, from the Western alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II to the United States' alignment with Communist China

against the Soviet Union from the 1970s, also contributed to victory in both World War II and the Cold War.

THE SOVIET THREAT

The second claim, that the need to build the liberal order drove the United States to abandon its traditional isolationism, is also well expressed by Nye. In his words, “The demonstrable success of the order . . . has led to a strong consensus that defending, deepening, and extending this system has been and continues to be the central task of U.S. foreign policy.”

I argue that, on the contrary, the central driver of U.S. engagement in the world during these decades was neither the desire to advance liberalism abroad nor the need to build a liberal international order. It was leaders’ determination to do whatever they deemed necessary to preserve liberal democracy in just one country—the United States—from what they saw as the existential threat of Soviet communism. Mazarr cites the historian Mark Mazower’s *Governing the World* to support his position that Washington’s original aim went beyond containment. But as Mazower himself rightly notes, “The model for [NATO] was the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance that had opened by talking about the UN and the need to avoid war among the signatories but was really a military alliance against a threat from outside the hemisphere.”

I agree with both responses that the liberal order forms part of the explanation for U.S. engagement abroad. As I argued, the United States has never aimed to preserve liberal democracy only at home. Its defining creed proclaims that God endowed all human beings with rights to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” When reconstructing its defeated adversaries after World War II and shoring up its allies in Western Europe, the United States sought to build liberal democracies with which it would share values as well as interests.

But those efforts were, I suggest, building blocks in an order designed first and foremost to defeat the Soviet Union. Had there been no Soviet threat, there would have been no Marshall Plan and no NATO. As I wrote, “The United States has never promoted liberalism abroad when it believed that doing so would pose a significant threat to its vital interests at home.”

BEYOND TRUMP

When it comes to the third claim made by many proponents of the liberal order, that Trump marks the primary threat to global order, my respondents take a pass. We agree that Trump’s misunderstanding of the strength that comes from unity with allies and his withdrawal of the United States from initiatives championed by prior administrations aimed at promoting fair trade and constraining greenhouse gas emissions are undermining the international order. But I argue that the decline of U.S. global power, the meteoric rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and, most of all, the long-term failures of American democracy are each more significant than Trump. Lissner and Rapp-Hooper seem to agree. As they aptly put it, “Trump may be more avatar than architect of the United States’ domestic unraveling,” and, “Global influence is shifting eastward, pushing the United States and Europe into second place.”

In the final chapter of my recent book on the China challenge, *Destined for War*, I ask, “What poses the single largest threat to America’s standing in the world?” “The answer,” I conclude, “is found in failures of the American political system.” The defining challenge for Americans today is nothing less than to reconstruct a working democracy within their borders. Unfortunately, too many Americans, especially in the foreign policy community, have lost the Founding Fathers’ keen sense of just how radical, audacious, and hazardous the U.S. experiment in self-government is. When Benjamin Franklin quipped that Americans had gotten “a Republic, if you can keep it,” and when Abraham Lincoln asked “whether that nation, or any nation so conceived . . . can long endure,” neither thought he was raising a rhetorical question.

As Americans try to make liberalism work at home, U.S. foreign policy should not cling to the status quo or attempt to return to an imagined past when the United States molded the world in its own image. As I wrote, Americans need “a surge of strategic imagination as far beyond the current conventional wisdom as the Cold War strategy that emerged over the four years after Kennan’s Long Telegram was from the Washington consensus in 1946.”

That is easy to say but hard to do. Americans might start by revisiting President John F. Kennedy’s call for a world order “safe for diversity”—liberal and illiberal alike—as they focus on the home front. Once again, Americans need to demonstrate the enduring truth of the idea on which their country was founded: that liberal democracy can deliver more of what citizens want than any other form of government known to mankind.

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